



# An Incurable Past: Nasser's Egypt Then and Now

*Mérian N. Belli*

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“Spanning virtually the entire twentieth century and as timely as the outbreak of the 2011 ‘January Revolution,’ this work has much to say about where Egypt has been, who Egyptians are and, ultimately, where they may take their country.”—Joel Gordon, author of *Nasser: Hero of the Arab Nation*

“A truly extraordinary accomplishment that is thought provoking, creative, and inspiring. Belli is the first in Middle Eastern studies to examine the cultural history of twentieth-century Egypt through the interactions between education and remembrance. Her revised theoretical approach is applicable not only to Middle Eastern societies and cultures, but to others worldwide.”—Israel Gershoni, Tel Aviv University

“An interesting history of memory that is diverse, dynamic, and disparate. Makes an outstanding contribution to our understandings of Egyptian national identity and memory.”—Nancy L. Stockdale, University of North Texas

Examining history not as it was recorded, but as it is remembered, *An Incurable Past* contextualizes the classist and deeply disappointing post-Nasserist period that has inspired today’s Egyptian revolutionaries. Public performances, songs, stories, oral histories, and everyday speech reveal not just the history of mid-twentieth-century Egypt, but also the ways in which ordinary people experience and remember the past.

Constructing a ground-breaking theoretical framework, Mérial Belli demonstrates the fragility of the “collectivity” and the urgent need to replace the current method for studying collective memory with a new approach she defines as “historical utterances.” Contextual and relational, these links between intimate and public historical narratives are an integral part of a society’s dialogue about its past, present, and future. Three major vernacular expressions constitute the historical utterances that illuminate the Nasserite experience and its present. The first is universal schooling and education. The second is anti-colonial struggle, as exemplified by Port Said’s effigy burning festival. The third is the public’s responses to the “miraculous millenarian” apparition of the Virgin Mary.

Using an extensive array of sources, ranging from official archives and press reportage to fiction, public rituals, and oral interviews, Belli’s findings penetrate issues of class, religion, and social and political activism. She shows that personal testimonies and public representations allow us a deep understanding of Egypt’s construction of the modern in its many sociocultural layers.

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